

Spring 4-24-2024

Death, Dying, and Overcoming: A Nietzschean Reading of Yukio Mishima's Confessions of a Mask

Chase Mikles

West Virginia University

Death, Dying, and Overcoming: A Nietzschean Reading of Yukio Mishima's *Confessions of a Mask*

Chase Mikles

ENGL-496

Dr. Michael Germana

24 April 2024

Yukio Mishima's first novel, *Confessions of a Mask*, was an instant success when it first published in 1949 and served as the beginning of Mishima's rise to becoming one of, if not the most prominent postwar Japanese writers. However, because of the novel's heavy nationalistic undertone tied with its very nontraditional and often lamenting perspective towards homosexuality, it has been largely overlooked by Western academia until recently. It presents a complex notion of queer identity, one that John Pistelli describes in his review as "[an] inapplicability of the word 'queer,' with all its contemporary political connotations, to a reactionary mid-century Japanese writer who based his sexual identity on *fin-de-siècle* Decadent literature and modernist sexual science" (Pistelli). As implied by Pistelli's review, critical essays on the novel tend to be a pull towards two distinct and competing perspectives: either trying to situate the novel within the understood Western notions of philosophical identity, or by reading the novel through a historical perspective towards traditional Japanese culture.

Confessions of a Mask was written and published during a time of immense social and cultural shifts in Japan. As noted by scholars with a particular eye towards historical influence, once Japan opened for trade—simultaneously ushering in what is now known as the Meiji Restoration—there was a sudden influx of Western influence changing both the literary and social landscapes that had remained stagnant in Japan for the nearly 300-year timeframe known as the Edo period. Prominent Japanese novelists writing during this time began incorporating ideas found in Western thought into their own works—creating a sort of cultural mesh between both Japanese and Western influence. Mishima, who was inspired by such authors, incorporates a similar framework within his novel.¹ While Mishima has never discussed which Western

¹ This information comes from Roy Starrs' article, "Nietzschean Dialectics in the Novels of Mishima Yukio," which is discussed in detail later in the essay.

concepts that directly inspired this novel, many scholars choose to overlay Nietzschean philosophy as being the main influence for the ideas presented within this novel. To argue their position, they argue that the protagonist of the novel, Kochan, is insistently attempting to overcome his own personal shortcomings by adopting a “mask”² of the social ideals that he himself believes Japanese society is pushing him towards. Although his outward actions display a character that has been molded perfectly to fit within his society, because the novel is written from the first-person perspective we are given a detailed look into how his inner thoughts and desires stand in direct opposition to the roles that he is expected to perform. Throughout the novel Kochan reveals himself to have homosexual urges, self-destructive ideations, and a complete awareness of himself as playing the part of a righteous and upstanding citizen.

Additionally, while Mishima’s use of nationalism has been used as a way of strengthening the historical approach, it is generally overlooked by essayists who choose to adopt a recognizably Western perspective. However, by embracing this key facet of the novel, it seems that both opposing perspectives fall short in encapsulating the total complexities surrounding the identity of Kochan. This essay first explores the historical and cultural context surrounding the novel by introducing scholars who argue that the nationalist and sexual desires faced by Kochan are influenced by a wholly Japanese conception of identity. Then, through utilizing less rigid historically and philosophically grounded scholars, Kochan’s new ‘masked’ identity begins to appear as an affliction marked by some resistance to the social order in which his character is surrounded. Finally, after the presence of the mask is revealed, this essay will utilize key concepts from Nietzschean philosophy in an attempt to make sense of the remarkably queer and

² Having “mask” in quotations alludes to the later connection to Nietzsche’s use of the term which is also established by Starrs.

self-destructive ideology that emerges from Kochan's reflections towards the now unveiled social script of mid-20th century Japan.

The first distinct half of the novel follows Kochan as he 'tragically'³ recalls the thoughts and scenes from his childhood and adolescence during the intense setting of World War II Japan. From the very beginning, he explains how his childhood is marked by a distinct fascination with the tragic. Specifically, the first mention of a picture—which is a recurring motif throughout the novel—is his description of “a knight mounted on a white horse, holding a sword aloft...the knight's beautiful face peeped through the visor, and he brandished his drawn sword awesomely in the blue sky confronting either Death or, at the very least, some hurtling object full of evil power” (Mishima 11). He recalls how he was enthralled by the picture's story; but, he is only enthralled by the idea of imagining that the knight will be immediately killed shortly after his triumphant pose. This marks his first admittance of his perturbed fascination with death—a fascination that will continue to grow stronger throughout his childhood years. However, when describing this first recollection, another added layer of his character is exposed when he describes the reaction to his sick nurse explaining that the photo is of the female heroine, Joan of Arc. He writes:

I felt as though I had been knocked flat...If this beautiful knight was a woman and not a man, what was there left? (Even today I feel a repugnance, deep rooted and hard to explain, toward women in male attire.) This was the first 'revenge by reality' that I had met in life, and it seemed a cruel one, particularly upon the sweet fantasies I had cherished concerning *his* death. (Mishima 12)

³ Junko Saeki refers to the first half of the novel as a tragedy within her essay: “From ‘Nanshoku’ to Homosexuality: A Comparative study of Mishima Yukio's Confessions of a Mask.”

Such a blatant admittance of misogyny, and what could be seen as the first of many ‘confessions,’⁴ is what Junko Saeki describes in her article, “From ‘Nanshoku’ to Homosexuality: A Comparative study of Mishima Yukio’s *Confessions of a Mask*,” as Mishima’s own shared ideals with the ethics attributed to the practice of *nanshoku*—the pederastic relationships formed between a samurai sensei and the younger male student. She describes how from an early age, males were taught to keep their official obligations separate from female spaces to prevent “...themselves from being polluted by ‘femininity,’ identified with physical and mental weakness and fear of death” (Saeki 131). In a way, Saeki’s relation seems to hold true as Kochan is remarking on his thought that a knight—a military figure not too dissimilar from the samurai—must be characteristically male in some way: and that by being female, it somehow degrades his own ideal image of masculinity. Yet, this direct historical link is the furthest extent to which Saeki pushes her argument. She neither explains the text’s connection between femininity and weakness, nor does she explain the implied inverse—masculinity and power.

There must be some missing link relating Kochan’s idealized perception of masculinity with notions of power. And such a link makes itself known within the very next scene proceeding his reaction to the picture of Joan of Arc. Here, Kochan describes his earliest memory of seeing militant troops walking through the streets. But unlike the previous memory, Kochan remarks on this interaction not with disgust, but with a sensuous and almost erotic tone. He writes:

The soldiers’ odor of sweat—that odor like a sea breeze, like the air, burned to gold, above the seashore—struck my nostrils and intoxicated me. This was probably my

⁴ The first half of the novel presents a recollection of distinct memories followed by a reflection on the memories meaning. These reflections are referred to by both Roy Starrs and Graham Parkes as the titular confessions.

earliest memory of odors. Needless to say, the odor could not, at that time, have had any direct relationship with sexual sensations, but it did gradually and tenaciously arouse within me a sensuous craving for such things as the destiny of soldiers, the tragic nature of their calling, the distant countries they would see, the ways they would die...

(Mishima 14)

When juxtaposed with the first confession, there is a stronger focus on the sensuous way in which Kochan sees males who he believes embody his self-perceived notion of masculinity. However, he mentions how he craves not their bodies, but their destinies—their death. This point is where the arguments made by Saeki do not entirely line up with the historical background that she offers. She admits that the principles of *nanshoku* were to eliminate the fear of death, but here, Kochan seems to be actively seeking out only death. Through vicariously envisioning himself in the bodies of either medieval knights or with contemporary soldiers, there is always the thought of wanting to see or possibly even experience their death. As is implied in this scene and what is shown through future confessions, his sexual identity is also founded upon this fascination with death.

Mishima himself stresses the importance of these introductory scenes through immediately following these scenes with the following reflection:

These odd images were the first things I encountered in life. From the beginning they stood before me in truly masterful completeness...Ever since childhood my ideas concerning human existence have never once deviated from the Augustinian theory of predetermination. Over and over again I was tormented by vain doubts—even as I continue being tormented today—but I regarded such doubts as only another sort of temptation to sin and remained unshaken in my deterministic views. (Mishima 15)

Kochan directly lays out his own personal philosophy of predetermination: and what I will argue is the emerging semblance of an identity that is founded upon the principles of Nietzschean philosophy. While this may seem as much of, if not more of a leap in thought when compared to Saeki's historical relation, Roy Starrs article, "Nietzschean Dialectics in the Novels of Mishima Yukio," proves that this posited relationship between the two goes beyond mere coincidence.

In his article, Starrs writes that *Confessions of a Mask* offers a view of a feminized childhood coupled with a 'somasochistic' portrayal of homosexuality. Yet, before coming to this conclusion, he first begins his article by first providing the historical context necessary for understanding how German philosophy made the arduous trek to Kochan's contemporary Japan. He states that by the 1890's, largely due to the rapid Westernization of Japan after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, many Japanese students and academics travelled to Europe ready to learn anything and everything about this newfound world of Western culture. As time went on, largely because of the Japanese politicians' own interests in adopting the social and political ideals of Bismarck's Germany, there was a sudden intellectual shift away from British and French thought in favor of German philosophy. He goes further to explain how the first Japanese novelist to adopt such explicitly German philosophical concepts into their writings was Mori Ōgai (1862-1922). In his novels, he would express a revised version of individualism, focused on the Nietzschean Apollonian/Dionysian dialectic, and promote "the controlled, rational, Apollonian side of human nature [as] dominating over the uncontrolled, instinctive (particularly sexual) Dionysian side" (Starrs 20). Dying only two years before Mishima was born, Starrs describes Mishima as a deep admirer of Ōgai's works—so much so, that he would continually attempt to emulate the philosophical undertones present within Ōgai's works within his own. He argues that this structure presents a philosophical argument that is similar to Ōgai's, but it instead presents

the reverse of the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy: with the Dionysian instinct, specifically concerning Kochan's homosexuality, triumphing over his best efforts to control his desires.

Starrs' argument in favor of a philosophical approach to the novel begins to reposition the arguments made by Saeki not as irrelevant, but more as only a piece of the underlying forces that shape the complexity of Kochan's emerging identity. It has been shown that there is indeed a pulling towards the traditional ideals associated with *nanshoku*; particularly through Kochan's blatant misogyny. But as Western influence began spreading across Japan, so too did the homosexual practices of *nanshoku* begin to fall out of the realm of social normativity: and an unmistakably Western disdain towards homosexuality quickly took its place.⁵ As such, Starrs reveals that is at least an equal, or perhaps even greater pull towards the opposite ideals of the Western world. Nevertheless, while this begins to illustrate the larger picture of Kochan's identity en masse, the question surrounding how his focus on death, or what Starrs has now defined as sadomasochism, plays into this presented schema remains.

The first explicit mentioning of Kochan's sexual identity, and what is regarded as the most infamous scene within the novel, comes in the form of yet another sensuous memory surrounding a certain picture. In this confession, Kochan recalls seeing Guido Reni's "St. Sebastian" in his father's library during an afternoon of his teenage years. He recalls being infatuated by the perfect depiction of the "springtime of youth, only light and beauty and pleasure" (Mishima 39). But of course, this description is contrasted by the painting's real depiction of St. Sebastian's death; being punctured by multiple arrows while completely restrained and tied to a tree. He relishes in what he believes to be the saint's calm tranquil

⁵ Although this seems contradictory to the argument made by Saeki, she does include this information in her article. It is also corroborated by Rei Naka's article, "Gendered Trajectories to Tolerance: Men's and Women's Changing Attitudes toward Homosexuality in Japan." (See Works Cited)

demeanor when faced with the prospect of a certain demise: so much so that he recounts that this is the first time he had engaged within a somehow “completely unconscious” (Mishima 39) display of self-gratification. Although the connection is obvious, this undoubtedly relates back to Starrs’ claim that his sexual impulses are indicative of the Dionysian instinct—and Kochan himself mentions a similar viewpoint immediately following the sexual scene.

Provokingly, Kochan cites Magnus Hirschfeld, a prominent German sexologist during the late 19th and early 20th century, and his theory of inversion—where the invert (homosexual) feels more inclined to participate in activities and dress as the gender opposite of their gender designated at birth—as being somehow related to his own personal affliction.⁶ He writes:

(It is an interesting coincidence that Hirschfeld should place ‘picture of St. Sebastian’ in the first rank of those kinds of art works in which the invert takes special delight. This observation of Hirschfeld’s leads easily to the conjecture that in the overwhelming majority of cases of inversion, especially of congenital inversion, the inverted and the sadistic impulses are inextricably entangled with each other.) (Mishima 41)

Yet, as shown earlier, Kochan has both a disdain for features of femininity as well as a specific ‘repugnance’ towards gendered crossdressing. To mend this explicit contradictory inclusion, Kochan goes on to give a short summary of Sebastian’s life. He describes how he was born into and became a captain in the Praetorian Guard of Rome during the rule of Diocletian, an emperor who “abhorred Christianity” (Mishima 42). Sebastian, a secret convert to Christianity, despite being a model Roman citizen who was admired for his benevolence, is set to be executed once his secret makes itself known to the emperor. With Starr’s idea of the Dionysian instinct in mind,

⁶ Information regarding Magnus Hirschfeld’s ideas was gathered from Camilla Smith’s article, “Uneasy Articulations: Magnus Hirschfeld, Art, and Sexual Science in Early Twentieth-Century Germany.”

this scene seems to serve as the starting opposition to the idea that Kochan takes a strictly negative view towards his own tendencies towards homosexuality. Through comparing himself to the mythical story associated with St. Sebastian, Kochan has inadvertently revealed a more socially fueled reason as to why he desires to keep his sexuality constrained and secretive. Rather than it being read more as his own personal unacceptance of himself, through this relation, it seems to be the first possible mention of his social surroundings as being at least a factor in his desire for repression. Although this isn't to say there isn't an unaccepting factor found within his own complex personal philosophy, the demagogical position—like the figure of Diocletian in the story—that society is raised to within this specific instance is a substantial revelation that begins to push towards an even more complex portrayal of Kochan's character.

A similar awareness of Kochan's social surroundings is the main idea expressed within Graham Parkes short essay, "Facing the Masks: Persona and Self in Nietzsche, Rilke and Mishima." Rather than viewing Kochan's confessions as being a product of an internal lack of self-control, as is insinuated by Starr's article, Parkes instead argues for the opposite side of this argument. He argues that Kochan's internal desires should be read as legitimate, but the external forces of the socially rigid ideals promoted through such a nationalistic society is what has forced them to remain suppressed. In order to reach this conclusion, he utilizes the figure of the 'mask' as being able to transcend this aforementioned divide between Western thought and Japanese culture. He explains that both within the word's Latin context—specifically the phrase *larvatus prode* (I wear a mask)—and within Japanese culture, that the mask can be viewed as representative of the person as a whole. He states that "we use 'inner' masks to conceal parts of our selves we would rather not acknowledge [and] at the same time, the choice of a particular mask signifies a part of the person and can bring out a side of the wearer's personality that would

otherwise remain hidden” (Parkes 65). In this sense, every person is a wearer of a particular mask; and we mold our own masks to present ourselves as best we deem fit. Furthermore, within Japanese culture, an added layer of this notion of the mask presents itself through the Confucianist beliefs of good and bad face: where *menmoku o usinau*—literally translated to losing the mask that confronts the eyes—plays an integral role in dictating notions of honor, dignity, and reputation. While it could be argued a similar framework is idly at play within the Western conception of these ideas, Parkes states that it can’t be adequately related to the significant effect it has on self-presentation within Japanese culture and society.

Taking this idea further, it can be argued that Kochan’s desire to conform to the traditional *nanshoku* ideals—ideals that are in themselves inherently nationalistic—is his own seemingly unknowing drive to adopt a mask that will be accepted by the social order in which he himself is surrounded. Parkes supports such a claim through directly relating the idea of the mask as being representative of one’s own chosen personality with Nietzsche’s philosophy regarding the nature of identity. He quotes section 316 of Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* which states: “Falseness with a good conscience; the delight in simulation exploding as a power that pushes aside one’s so-called ‘character,’ flooding it and at times extinguishing it; the inner craving for a role and mask, for appearance... all of this is perhaps not only peculiar to the actor?” (Nietzsche § 316). In this context, everyone is an actor that is only playing the part of what could be considered as the individual’s ‘part.’ Even so, rather than passively and unknowingly accepting this role as infallible, if the individual can see their role as an actor as playing a part it then gives the individual the power to modulate their own role to fit any social situation. And it follows that it also provides the option of masking any piece of their character that they would otherwise not want to be shown. Now if this idea of the mask is applied to the earlier historical background

provided by Starrs, it can be argued that the adoption of the nationalistic attitudes being cemented into Japanese society during the Meiji Restoration was not a matter of choice, rather it was more of a forced adoption prompted by Confucianist principles already rooted within the very fabric of the culture.

With the connection between the historically grounded views of Sacki and Western philosophy now taking shape, the question of whether or not Kochan is aware of his position as an actor still remains unanswered. The answer—because of the novel being laid out as a present recollection of the past—is only revealed after a certain point in his childhood. Although he is presently aware of the social mask he was then wearing, it doesn't seem clear that this awareness was present during the entirety of his adolescence or even for many of his teenage years. Additionally, there is a distinct and poignant moment when he seemingly becomes distinctly aware of his subject position. He writes:

“When a boy of fourteen or fifteen discovers that he is more given to introspection and consciousness of self than other boys his age... because the other boys had no such need of understanding themselves as I had: they could be their natural selves, whereas I was to play a part, a fact that would require considerable understanding and study.” (Mishima 104)

Kochan holds contempt for his peers knowing, or at least perceiving their confidence as meaning, that they do not feel the need to conform to their surroundings—they already possess the ‘natural’ inclinations that he himself wishes to have. And Parkes too relays a similar conclusion that we have reached thus far stating that homosexuality “being masked is not what is important: the real issue is the presentation of desire in general and the conforming of its

expressions to socially acceptable modes—a predicament more acute for a Japanese than a Westerner” (Parkes 72).

Relating these ideas back to Saeki, while her historical background can be interpreted as important for understanding the social pressures influencing Kochan, it seems erroneous to imply that Kochan willingly plays into such pressures as the sole means of producing or adopting an Edo-era cultural identity. Similarly, while Starrs’ stresses the importance of Kochan’s seeming need to repress his Dionysian instincts, he only goes so far as to pinpoint his underlying ‘somasochist’ desires as the root cause for his needing to adopt such social masks. It is Parkes that takes the argument just far enough to direct the desires of adopting the mask not as coming from within Kochan himself, but rather as being a product of the strenuous social pressures that Kochan finds himself constantly surrounded by. Despite this, while Parkes reliance on Nietzschean philosophy serves as an answer as to why Kochan feels the need to adopt a mask, he neglects to analyze how the confessions of his true identity—the identity hiding behind the mask—also conforms to the same and similar ideas found throughout Nietzsche extensive work on existentialist thought. Though Starrs does begin to tease out such an analysis through his reliance on the Dionysian dialectic, I believe that we can go even further in dissecting possible motivations for Kochan’s further confessions in relation to the ideas that have already been mentioned.

Following the previous quote relaying Kochan’s epiphany regarding his awareness of his own mask, the novel takes a noticeable shift when transitioning into its second half. Whereas there are brief inclusions of his present views scattered throughout the retelling of his childhood scenes within the first half, his views become much more predominate throughout this second half. It would seem as if he begins to grapple with thoughts that are still troubling and remain

somewhat unanswerable for him even from this privileged present perspective. Rather than sounding resolute in providing a rationale behind the thoughts and actions of his childhood, a distinctly unsure and questioning tone arises in the confessions that follow. One such instance of this comes in the form of a reflection on the ‘sadoomasochist’ desires that made themselves apparent during his original sexual awakening. He writes:

“From the very beginning, life had oppressed me with a heavy sense of duty. Even though I was clearly incapable of performing this duty, life still nagged at me for my dereliction. Thus, I longed for the great sense of relief that death would surely bring... I sensuously accepted the creed of death that was popular during that war. I thought that if by any chance I should attain ‘glorious death in battle,’ this would be a truly ironical end for my life... And when the sirens sounded, that same me would dash for the air-raid shelters faster than anyone” (Mishima 127).

The passage—which is itself jarringly stuck between a memory of his graduation from school and the meeting of his future girlfriend—leaves an open-ended approach to the way in which Kochan’s fixation towards death plays in the formation of his personal identity. With the beginning sentences surely offering evidence in favor of the argument towards a resistance to social conformity, it seems as if Kochan would want to condemn the thoughts of dying from his now present perspective as being merely a symptom of his surroundings. However, that must not be entirely the case as his desire for death still remains as a supporting pillar of his now emerging identity. But this is also not to say that Kochan’s longing for death is a result of some inherit pull towards social conformity either. As we have already established, Kochan wouldn’t feel the need to adopt a mask if his goal were as simple to comply with the nationalist ideals that everyone else already seems to adhere to. Likewise, his fascination with death didn’t appear directly because of

such surroundings either; it was already present, perhaps even omnipresent, as the semblance of such ideas were there even during the beginning scenes with his sick nurse. Therefore, in order to understand Kochan's self-destructive urge for death, there must be some underlying principle within his own internal and obscured identity that is separate from any other outside influence.

I believe the principles fueling Kochan's own self-destructive ideology can again be again linked to Nietzschean thought. Even so, rather than seeing Kochan as operating under the desire to overcome only his homosexual urges—which is both an intermediate conclusion made by both Starrs and Parkes—I believe that he is attempting to adopt a much stronger, almost inhuman desire to overcome himself entirely. The ending of the passage in the previous paragraph calls to mind Nietzsche's idea of self-preservation—with its meaning being just that, the desire to preserve the self or life.⁷ In his collection of essays, serialized as *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes in section 13 of his first essay:

“And a good person is anyone who... leaves the taking of revenge to God, who keeps hidden as we do, avoids all evil and asks little from life in general, like us who are patient, humble and upright. This type of man needs to believe in an unbiased ‘subject’ with freedom of choice, because he has an instinct of self-preservation and self-affirmation in which every lie is sanctified” (Nietzsche § 13)

Here, he likens people to insects: showing that their desires for self-preservation and to live a calm life free of trouble and worry leads to a denying of possibility that is ingrained with the freedom of choice. Similarly, society plays the exact same role within this denying of possibility,

⁷ While Nietzsche never explicitly offers a concrete definition in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, he does liken the term with the question: “to what end should I injure myself uselessly and perhaps even then not achieve my goal?” (Nietzsche § 92).

with structural rules and codes; but it seems much more profound of a statement to say that the very act of living is somehow in opposition to this natural freedom. To overcome this, he states that we should strive to become an unbiased subject. To achieve freedom, or perhaps power is more apt for Nietzschean terminology, we must overcome the inclinations that appear to us as natural: including the seemingly innate fear of death itself.

Despite this passage seeming to lead towards an answer, it doesn't explicitly line up with Kochan's desire for the self-destructive. Nietzsche doesn't focus on death as a means to an end: he is only noting that a fear of death serves as a barrier that holds one back from achieving or accomplishing something that transcends one's own mortality.⁸ It doesn't seem applicable to apply this sentiment to Kochan in his current stage as his views towards death appear more haphazard and almost irrational. There seems to be no real cause or reason behind his views on dying beyond himself believing his life and his actions to be already meaningless. However, such a shift does present itself towards this more Nietzschean perspective as Kochan goes on to try and understand his own ingrained fascination with death by confronting it directly. He mentions how his 'other voice' revealed to him that he never truly wanted to die, and that imagining a death within the military was only a way of gratifying the sadomasochist desires previously discussed. Furthermore, he finally reveals the complicated dichotomy towards his own feelings towards death by stating "I much preferred to think of myself instead as a person who had been forsaken even by Death... In the same way that a doctor... focuses all his faculties upon the operation and still remain impersonal" (Mishima 139). Utilizing the concept of the Dionysian instinct once again, it can be stated that the irrational fascination with death is merely a symptom

⁸ In section 28 of *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche explains that self-preservation stands in the way of creativity and transcendence.

of his already irrational views towards sexuality—something that was already implied by Starrs himself. Only this time he becomes the unbiased subject: and his ‘other voice,’ the Apollonian voice of reason, allows him to see his self-destructive views as we have already described them. In this way, through this moment of self-reflection, he is given the power of control over his urges.

While Starrs is correct in his application of the Apollonian dichotomy onto Kochan’s masochistic impulse, it doesn’t seem entirely apparent that he holds or even desires a similar control over his underlying tendencies towards homosexuality. When removed from the idea that his homosexuality is intertwined with the sadomasochism, a deeper and more critical view of his social surroundings appears. During the second half of the novel we are introduced to Kochan’s girlfriend, Sonoko. With Kochan desperately trying to love Sonoko and act against his own homosexual desires, it becomes immediately apparent that their relationship is merely another fabrication of the mask. While this may seem to be in favor of Starrs’ original claim, there are brief but distinct moments where these moments of striving for love presents itself as more in line with Nietzsche’s theory of weakness by means of self-preservation. One night while talking to her, Kochan says “Don’t worry,’ Sonoko. ‘You won’t be killed. You won’t be even slightly hurt. Every night I pray to the Lord Jesus for you, and my prayers are always answered.” Sonoko then replies, “You’re very devout, aren’t you? That’s probably the reason you have such peace of mind” (Mishima 204). Harkening back to the ideas presented within the quote from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Kochan—from his masked and blinded state—outwardly expresses a desire for everything condemned in the presented passage. He condemns any harm, shows a clear lack of agency, displays a reliance on holy powers, and is seemingly living a life of peace; a life of self-preservation and self-affirmation incarnate.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that this scene only includes words spoken by Kochan—not his actual thoughts. Any time there is any actual confession from his true identity it always comes in the form of a thought on any moment in which he is currently reflecting. Here, it is the masked identity that is talking to Sonoko; the outward masked identity that is marked by a reliance on social conformity. It is a few lines before this scene that we can see Kochan's actual internal thoughts on the scene. He writes:

“So then, this image of a lukewarm man that Sonoko was now seeing, this thing that appeared to be my character, aroused my disgust, made my entire existence seem worthless, and tore my self-confidence into shreds. I was made to distrust both my will and my character, or at least, so far as my will was concerned, I could not believe it was anything but a fake.” (Mishima 204)

Here there is a recognition that his actions and words directed towards Sonoko are nothing more than the very same lies of false identity that Nietzsche argues is perpetuated through self-preservation. And Kochan himself immediately recognizes this even from a very early stage in the development of their relationship.

The role that the self-destructive plays within Kochan's character shouldn't be seen only as contradictory aim at overcoming the desire for self-preservation. It would be absurd to suggest that a desire or fascination with death and dying promotes mastery over one's own uncontrollable desire to continue living. As previously stated, he doesn't actually wish to die, and he realizes that he never had a real intention of ever realizing his visions of death. It is true to say that his ideations towards death are irrational; but such a statement also implies that such desires hold little importance to the development of his character—a statement that I hope has already been shown to false. So, if Kochan sees actualizing the physical act of death in the biological sense as

being irrational, it seems that death then must take on a more abstract and metaphorical meaning. And when this idea is applied to Nietzsche, his most existentially puzzling idea seems to be the appropriate solution. Again, within *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche lays out what has been termed self-overcoming. He writes:

“All great things bring about their own demise through an act of self-sublimation: that is the law of life, the law of necessary ‘self-overcoming’ in the essence of life— we stand on the threshold of this occurrence... ‘What does all will to truth mean?’: what meaning does our being have, if it were not that that will to truth has become conscious of itself as a problem in us? . . . Without a doubt, from now on, morality will be destroyed by the will to truth’s becoming-conscious-of itself.” (Nietzsche § 27)

In connection to Starrs, it seems that the idea of self-overcoming could easily be applied to previous dialect that has already been heavily discussed. And with the revelation that Kochan now views dying in war as an irrational and unachievable end, it could be argued that he has realized the absurdity of war and the eventual death that ensues from it as being a chaotic form of the Dionysian urge. He now describes war as “a spectacle seen from the distance” and that for him there is no “essential difference whether the falling plane was ours or the enemy’s” (Mishima 189). With the intense desires to attain the idealized version of masculinity and die in battle now being juxtaposed with his now somber and critical view towards war, there is a sense in which the Kochan of his youth has died—or his present motivations no longer revolve around and have triumphed the fascination with real physical death in his youth.

Despite Starrs’ article certainly teasing out the beginnings of this argument from self-overcoming, it still doesn’t seem appropriate to apply this concept to his sexuality; or his sexuality insofar as it relates to a simple attraction for the same sex. Along with his

condemnation of death in war, Kochan has also indirectly condemned the sadomasochist desires that were fueling the confusing and disturbing confessions from the sexuality of his youth. Interestingly, despite realizing the absurdity of such sadomasochism, we are told that his homosexual urges not only remain but are still implicitly guiding his social interactions. In the second to last scene in the novel, Kochan visits a strip club with a group of his male friends. But no matter how hard he tries to enjoy the presence of the prostitute that his friends had paid to have him seduced, he is completely incapable of even pretending to seem happy. On this encounter he notes that he “became depressed... [because] the need to prove to myself that I had some sort of potency seemed to become more urgent each day... And yet nowhere could I discover a clue to the realization of my inherent perversity” (Mishima 230). If Kochan is able to instantiate the concept of self-overcoming in regards to his own sadomasochist fetishes, why then is he unable to do so concerning the nature of his homosexuality? Despite declaring his homosexuality as being a ‘perversity,’ there must be something more controlling the root of his desires that he cannot himself overcome.

The answer to such a question is abstractly found within the final confession of the novel. He writes:

“But then another thought occurred to me: if we grant that human passion has the power to rise above all absurdity, how can it be argued that it does not have the power to rise above the absurdities of passion itself?” (Mishima 240)

From this passage, where Kochan is reflecting on his relationship to Sonoko, he explicitly labels passion (or desire) as being wholly separate from all other human absurdities. It stands alone: while in itself still being absurd. I submit the conclusion that this is the penultimate moment in which Kochan’s entirely mediated self-reflective journey arrives at the very same, very abstract

concepts found within Nietzsche's existential ideas concerning human existence. Now, after contemplating the major moments from his entire life's story, he realizes the true absurdity found not only within his futile fascination with death and war, but also the larger and inescapable absurdity found within the very essence of life itself—a conclusion resoundingly similar to Nietzsche's own stance regarding human nature. Through questioning the true nature of a 'will to truth,' Nietzsche also recognizes the impossibility of truly seeing beyond our socially imposed perspectives. Despite this, that isn't to say it is necessarily pointless. There should always be an attempt at trying to reach this unachievable aim; and that aim is formed through the process of self-overcoming. By constantly analyzing our motivations, our obstacles, our desires—everything that forms our being—we can pinpoint the specific things that impede our goals of achieving this higher concept of truth and, consequently, attempt to overcome them.

In a sense, the entire novel is written through the lens of Kochan's own attempt at self-overcoming. With each memory comes a new confession: and with each confession comes a new rationale explaining its meaning. Kochan is in a constant state of self-overcoming; constantly attempting to understand himself better through a self-reflective analysis. With this idea being mainly targeted towards his sexuality, there are clear moments where he is able to triumph over his unfavorable urges. In spite of this, no matter the effort, he isn't ever able to truly overcome a more intimate desire for simple same-sex companionship. While the concept of sexuality remains ambiguous, the closing sections of the novel seems to imply that there is some realization that his desire for same-sex attraction is at least permissible, if not a larger part of his own self-guided journey towards a higher form of truth. Subsequently, in part due to his position as a social actor, even though his same-sex desires are revealed as absurd, they are ultimately found to be no more absurd than any other desire—heterosexual, sadomasochist, or otherwise. In this way, Kochan

not only represents an example of Nietzschean philosophy put into a real-world context, but the inner thoughts formed behind his socially imposed mask reveals a subtle rationale in favor of accepting homosexuality.

Works Cited

- Dawes, K. P. Mori Ōgai. Great Neck Publishing, 2023.
- Mishima, Yukio. *Confessions of a Mask*. New Directions, 1958.
- Naka, Rei. “Gendered Trajectories to Tolerance: Men’s and Women’s Changing Attitudes toward Homosexuality in Japan, 1981–2019.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 70, no. 14, Dec. 2023, pp. 493–514.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2020.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Gay Science*. New York, Vintage Books, 1974.
- Parkes, Graham. “Facing the Masks: Persona and Self in Nietzsche, Rilke and Mishima.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1987, pp. 65–79.
- Pistelli, John. “Yukio Mishima, Confessions of a Mask.” *Yukio Mishima, Confessions of a Mask*, 10 May 2021, johnpistelli.com/2020/07/03/yukio-mishima-confessions-of-a-mask.
- Polyakova Ekaterina A. “Friedrich Nietzsche: From the ‘Self-Overcoming of Morality’ to the Morality of Self-Overcoming.” *Bulletin of the St. Philaret Institute*, no. 47, Aug. 2023, pp. 89–106.
- Saeki, Junko. “From ‘Nanshoku’ to Homosexuality: A Comparative study of Mishima Yukio’s Confessions of a Mask.” *Japan Review*, vol. 8, 1997, pp. 127–142.
- Smith, Camilla. “Uneasy Articulations: Magnus Hirschfeld, Art, and Sexual Science in Early Twentieth-Century Germany.” *Art Bulletin*, vol. 105, no. 2, June 2023, pp. 81–112.
- Starrs, Roy. “Nietzschean Dialectics in the Novels of Mishima Yukio.” *Jour*, 1990, pp. 18–40.

Starrs, Roy. *Deadly Dialectics: Sex, Violence, and Nihilism in the World of Yukio Mishima*. Japan Library, 1994.